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KGB returns Wallenberg papers; kin say he lives

By Vincent J. Schodolski
Chicago Tribune

MOSCOW—The KGB turned over to family members Monday a passport, notebooks and money belonging to Raoul Wallenberg, the Swedish diplomat who saved tens of thousands of Jews during World War II before disappearing in the Soviet prison system.

Despite arguments from the family that he is still alive, the Soviet government continued to

insist Wallenberg had died in 1947.

"He was physically and psychologically very fit," said Nina Lagergren, Wallenberg's half-sister. "Other people have survived 45 years in the camps."

Wallenberg, who would be 77 now, was one of the enduring heroes of the war, during which he issued Swedish passports to perhaps as many as 20,000 Hungarian Jews about to be deported to death camps.

He was taken by Soviet forces

entering Budapest on Jan. 17, 1945, allegedly to a friendly meeting with the Soviet commander. Kremlin officials have insisted since 1957 that he died in Moscow's Lubyanka Prison of a heart attack two years after his detention.

His documents and other belongings were given to relatives of Wallenberg by the KGB, the Soviet state security agency, but family members said they remained convinced Wallenberg was alive and being held in isolation in a Soviet prison.

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Lagergren and Wallenberg's half-brother, Guy Von Darden, along with other members of the Raoul Wallenberg Association said they had firsthand information that Wallenberg was alive as recently as 1980 and hinted there had been a later sighting as well.

Wallenberg's half-siblings and other members of the association were invited to Moscow by Soviet officials who said they would produce new evidence that the Swede, heir to a huge industrial fortune, had died in 1947.

But the group remained skeptical after their meeting Monday.

"We think that it is peculiar that just before we came they find new things," said Per Anger, a former Swedish diplomat and chairman of the Wallenberg Association.

Anger, who worked with Wallenberg in wartime Hungary, said he had immediately recognized the diplomatic passport produced by the KGB since he himself had signed it for Wallenberg in Budapest.

The Soviets have admitted that postwar hysteria over spies and Josef Stalin's ruthlessness led to Wallenberg's arrest, but have continued to insist that he died of natural causes in jail.

On Monday Anger said the Swedish group was convinced the Soviets had lost all trace of Wallenberg as a result of the death of many of those who ran Stalin's prison camp system. However, he said there were too many witnesses who claim to have seen Wallenberg alive after 1947 for the Soviet story to be acceptable.

There were firsthand reports, he said, of Wallenberg being treated in a prison hospital in the Soviet city of Vladimir in 1979 or 1980.

Anger said his group had given the KGB a list of 20 people who said they saw Wallenberg alive after the time the Soviets insist he died, and asked for KGB help in finding them. Anger said the Swedes were convinced that at least half of those on the list were still alive and living in the Soviet Union.

The delegation, which will remain in Moscow until Friday, said it hopes to meet with as many of the witnesses as possible and then again with the KGB.

There have been repeated accounts by those who claim to have seen Wallenberg alive in Soviet prisons and hospitals.

A retired Hungarian translator,

identified by the Hungarian newspaper Magyar Nemzet as Mrs. Istvan K., said she was arrested by the Soviets in Budapest at the same time as Wallenberg and flown with him to Moscow.

"He did not expect anything good," she said about her conversations with Wallenberg during their flight. "When the plane took off he said, 'Take a good look because you will never see Hungary again,'" the woman said.

She said that when they landed in Moscow there were prison vans waiting for them. That was the last time she ever saw Wallenberg.

In addition to the passport and other materials handed over in plastic bags by the KGB Monday, the Swedes said Vladimir Pirozhkov, a man who was described as a deputy chairman of the KGB, produced a death certificate that has previously been declared suspect by Swedish officials.

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